

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN EDWARD J. MARKEY (D-MA)
PRESS CONFERENCE: SECURITY AT DOE NUCLEAR SITES
JANUARY 23, 2002

Thank you very much for being here today.

I am alarmed by what appears to be a decades-long failure by DOE to take security seriously. We now know what we are up against in the war against terrorism. We know we may be dealing with large groups of individuals who have the money, the training and the suicidal determination to carry out massive attacks on our soil. We also know that Al Qaeda members have been trying to obtain nuclear materials and want to attack U.S. nuclear facilities.

It takes about one large soda can's worth of weapons-grade plutonium and a volleyball's worth of weapons-grade uranium to make a crude nuclear bomb. I am told that once terrorists got access to enough weapons-grade uranium or plutonium, it would take very little time for them to build and detonate such a device. Unfortunately, security is so lax at some Department of Energy nuclear weapons sites where these materials are kept, that terrorists could find what they needed to launch a nuclear attack right here in America.

In October, 1997 I sent a letter to DOE that detailed the risk of terrorist attacks and lax security at many DOE facilities, including Rocky Flats near Denver Colorado, Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California and the Y-12 site at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. In response to that letter, DOE told me that "We take these challenges seriously, and we are working diligently to assure that all of our facilities are adequately protected.

Subsequent events raise serious questions about whether this is the case.

In June, 1999, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, chaired by former Senator Warren Rudman, issued a report entitled Science at its Best, Security at its Worst: A Report on Security Problems at the U.S. Department of Energy which concluded that DOE "has devoted far too little time, attention, and resources to the prosaic but grave responsibilities of security and counterintelligence in managing its weapons and other national security programs," and that DOE had essentially ignored 25 years worth of reports recommending improvements in security.

DOE seems to have ignored the Rudman report as well.

A September 2001 report entitled U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex: Security at Risk by the Project on Government Oversight described its eight-month investigation that used unclassified documents and credible whistleblower sources to establish that nuclear weapons materials at DOE sites remain vulnerable to theft, and that onsite construction and detonation of dirty bombs or homemade nuclear weapons is a real danger. Rather than attempting to steal weapons-grade uranium or plutonium from a DOE lab, running the risk of being apprehended on their way out, a group of suicidal terrorists might attempt to kill the DOE security guard forces at a site, and, once inside, build and detonate a dirty bomb or homemade nuclear bomb in minutes. They don't need to ever come out of the building.

A "dirty bomb" can be made by surrounding radioactive material with conventional explosives and then detonating the conventional explosives, or by detonating a large truck bomb adjacent to a facility used to store nuclear materials.

Even more alarming is the possibility that terrorists could rapidly build and detonate a "homemade nuclear bomb," which could release explosive nuclear yield. A group of suicidal terrorists could do this using propellants, conventional explosives, or even possibly just by throwing or shooting one piece of weapons-grade uranium at another in order to quickly start the chain reaction. I have been informed that the result could be equivalent to that of a detonation of a small nuclear weapon.

Before September 11, many people believed that "It can't happen here." But consider the facts:

In more than 50% of security tests at DOE's nuclear facilities, the mock "terrorists" won.

The vaults used to store weapons grade uranium and plutonium, some of which are reportedly constructed out of drywall, may not be adequately protected against impacts from large commercial aircraft or the detonation of large truck bombs nearby. Vaults containing weapons-grade plutonium or uranium have reportedly been found left unlocked and open for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week.

Rather than reward employees for bringing security flaws to the attention of their superiors, DOE has a long history of ignoring or retaliating against whistleblowers. Some of these courageous individuals are here today to share their stories with you.

It CAN happen here. We're lucky that it hasn't yet. Today, I call upon the Secretary of Energy to step up and solve the security problems, and I call upon General Scowcroft, who will soon release a report on security at these facilities, to release an unclassified version of the report so as to enable a full and open debate of the problems.